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Bangkok: Subtle Silken Luxury

By HENRY KAMM

The best gifts — for the traveler himself or for those whom he has left at home — are those that are not only made especially well in the place visited but seem somehow to evoke a bit of the essence of a distant land: The meticulous interior and elaborate exterior of a cuckoo clock represent important facets of Germany; a brightly embroidered Rumanian peasant blouse is redolent of the Balkans; there are pieces of glassware that seem to be renderings by art of the cool clearness of a Swedish or Finnish winter's day.

So it is with the silks of Thailand. Their exuberant colors and rough textures reflect a torrid country in which splendid materials abound, are prized and worked by hand into a finish that falls short of the soulless perfection that more sophisticated hands aspire to and machines achieve. Thai silk has as much nub as gloss. Compared to it, Chinese, French or Italian silk — possibly nobler in craft — "is so smooth it feels like polyester," said Surindr Supasavasdebandu, production manager of The Thai Silk Company.

The Thai Silk Company, never referred to by that name, is the fountainhead of an industry that was born only three decades ago. Visitors to Bangkok who now almost uniformly ask their resident friends to show them the way to "Jim Thompson's" are surprised when they are taken to the handsome re-creation of a 17th-century Thai house at the head of Suriwong Road that bears the more anonymous silk-company name. And they seem even more surprised when they learn that it was the founding of this company in 1948 by James H. W. Thompson, a Delaware blue blood and agent of the wartime Office of Strategic Services, that gave birth to what is

now a major industry.

Silk weaving in Thailand had been no more than a cottage craft, whose practitioners produced lengths of cloth for ceremonial wear before Thompson decided to return here after wartime service and saw a future in silk. A practicing architect (although he never received a university degree) and a compulsive collector, Thompson bought the occasional piece of silk, delighted by its rough texture and striking, lustrous color combinations.

According to William Warren, Thompson's friend and biographer, the silk merchant's first encouragement came in 1947, when he

took a suitcase full of silks to New York and showed the weavings to Edna Woolman Chase, then editor of Vogue. Thompson's first weavers were a small colony of Thai Moslems living in one of the many riverside villages that made up the once-lovely city of Bangkok.

Then as now, the weavers worked to order but independently, selling their product to the company. But even before the notion of "quality control" became a byword of industry, Thompson exercised it in daily visits to the weaving village. For years, the silks were made in traditional solid colors and simple, tartanlike linear patterns. Since 1961, however, hand-printed floral patterns and other designs have been added.

Thompson saw only the first phase of the industry that he started. In 1967 he disappeared without a trace on a holiday visit to friends in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia. In addition to Thai silk, he also left behind a marvelous collection of Oriental art, which remains on display at the Thai house that he had built on one of Bangkok's canals.

The Bangkok weavers' village has also disappeared; the rise in family earnings has dissuaded the sons and daughters of the original weavers from following so lowly a calling.

Most of the 900,000 yards of Jim Thompson silk that were produced last year came from the weavers of Pak Tong Chai, a small town in the northeast. They buy the raw silk, also produced in the northeast, from the company — along with dyes and other materials — and sell back the woven silk.

Quality control is still maintained by a corps of inspectors who visit each house almost daily. Some of the houses are, in fact, private factories with as many as 60 looms. Until recently, Thompson's successors at Thai Silk Company resisted suggestions to create a factory. Next year, in an effort to produce a greater variety of silks, an experimental "weaving house" is to be opened.

Company executives find it hard to number the weavers who produce Thompson Silk, but it is estimated that 300,000 families are now producing silk commercially. The Thai Silk Company claims more than 40 percent of the total market. The company dominates not only in volume of business but also in style and quality. The rest of the industry pays Jim Thompson the compliment of copious copying: Visits to Jim Thompson's and the other silk shops of Bangkok leave one with the impression that Thompson's two chief designers — one Thai, one American — provide the inspiration for all manufacturers.

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